

# Undergraduate Business Schools Should Require Theatre to Develop Soft Skills and to Better Employees

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## Introduction

Business is all about person to person communication, but many current corporate training programs do not seem to foster this skill. In fact, businesses are spending money for soft skills training and not seeing much, if any, return (Phillips 2015). On the other hand, theatre has long been noted to help students develop communication skills and empathy (Hartigan 2012). Many people have already observed the links and similarities between the business and theatre world. For example, Pine and Gilmore explore how we have become accustomed to businesses that perform for us. It no longer takes just a good product or service to make us excited; we need to have an experience and be entertained (1999). Similarly, Biehl-Missal analyzes the famous metaphor that all business is show business and notes that “theatre is a product of the audience and those who serve it and that the most important aspect is the performance and co-created experience” (Biehl-Missal, 2011), thus furthering the claim that in every business, the employees are actors and consumers the audience.

Thus some businesses are beginning to see theatre as a means to train the soft skills, which is also called emotional intelligence. For example, a few companies have experimented with the idea of corporate theatre, having theatre groups come in to do trust and team-building exercises. Managers have also been involved in hypothetical role play situations with their employees, and many companies have found that managers were better able to understand their employees’ needs; however, this process has not been widely used (Lesavre 2012). Rather than

discussing how theatre has been recognized in a current business setting to improve soft skills after employment, this paper will build on this recognition to address how theatre can be used to foster those skills prior to employment by providing undergraduate business students with theatrical education specializing in soft skills development. Although all aspects of theatre can help with developing much needed work skills in some way, this paper will focus specifically on actor training. Acting will be the focus due to the unique person to person interactions and skills developed in these classes. By helping students develop these tools via a required class in acting before entering the work-force, students will be more successful and emotionally intelligent individuals. Businesses can save money and time with soft skill training by employing students who not only have business degrees and business experience, but those who have theatre experience as well.

### **Defining “Soft Skills”**

To adequately discuss the importance of “soft skills,” it is important to define the term. According to Laura Wilcox, the director of management programs at Harvard, Extension School, soft skills are more than just some “touchy-feely” factor that employers can ignore; soft skills and emotional intelligence are key predictors of success in employees (2016). Daniel Goelman, an expert on emotional intelligence, defines these soft skills as proficiencies in how people manage their own emotions as well as understand them in others (1995). Another definition for emotional intelligence is as follows:

“ [Emotional Intelligence is] the way we understand our emotions but also those of other people as well as other people's feelings and sensations and mastering our

own feelings by deliberate choice of words and actions, in order to achieve desirable result” (Matulcikova, 2014).

Emotional intelligence includes many other components such as “communication, personal interaction, body language, voice inflection, and the transfer of positive energy” (Jamail 2015). Just as emotional intelligence is a complicated trait to define, communication is also a complex subject. What does it mean to be an effective communicator? Although millennials are communicating constantly, this communication is through more social media and technology than any generation before them. Students are constantly connecting and communicating through technology, but they are missing very important aspects of communication such as empathy, reading social cues, and understanding others’ objectives, emotions, and motives while hiding behind their screens. Aside from communication with others, people are also less self-aware. Our amount of online communication makes it easier to hide our intentions and emotions, even from ourselves. Understanding the way we display our emotions and regulating them during interactions with others is an important part of emotional intelligence.

Some question the role of empathy in business. Opponents of empathy in business tend to focus on the idea that a business’ primary purpose is to make money for their shareholders. In my opinion this model has been long outdated. Mintzberg, Simons, and Basu coined this way of thinking as “the syndrome of selfishness” (2002). The idea is that when businesses refuse to focus on others’ needs and wants, this can lead to unethical behavior. Mintzberg argues that we must think about business decisions from the standpoint of all stakeholders (community, environment, etc.) to make the best choice. It takes empathy to see others’ points of view. This would lead to healthier communities and therefore more prosperous businesses (Mintzberg 2002). More support for empathy in the workplace can be seen in studies that show that empathy

helps managers better monitor workplace discrimination. By being able to understand other's feelings and points a few, managers are better equipped to support employees (King 1995).

A final and perhaps more selfish reason to value empathy in the work place is that it benefits the employee personally to have higher levels of empathy. While emerging technology is important, person to person communication is a much-needed interpersonal skill. Jamail calls these interpersonal skills "differentiators" in the field of business. (Jamil 2015). Thus, by having these skills, employees can stand out among their peers (Tulgan 2015). Goleman even states that through his research, he has seen that emotional intelligence is more relevant than a person's intelligence quotient (IQ) to how a person will perform on the job. He states that emotional intelligence is a stronger predictor of success than someone's intelligence quotient (IQ). He stated that study after study showed that to be successful in a "top profession," you only needed to have an above average IQ of about 115. After that, IQ makes little to no difference. He explains that this is because at a certain point, your co-workers should have about the same relative intelligence. This is the IQ needed to do that basic task, and anything above that does not necessarily help you complete the task any better. Emotional intelligence is what makes an employee stand out. Employees with high emotional intelligence are self-motivated, adaptable, and self-aware in addition to being able to communicate with their peers (MoreThanSound.net). Businesses recognize that these skills are important, and almost every job description says communication skills are a must, but how can they test that? This leads them to attempt to train it on the job.

### **Current Soft Skills Training**

There is a dire need for soft skills training in undergraduate business students. Even right here at the Labovitz School of Business and Economics (LSBE) at the University of Minnesota

Duluth we can see this need. Currently, LSBE is developing a course in working in teams based on feedback they have received from employers that students could use development in this area. Strong soft skills are a large part of working successfully in a team. This feedback establishes the need for LSBE to explore their options in creating classes that address soft skills. While it will take time to see if this class achieves its goals, I have doubts about teaching soft skills in this type of setting. While it may be successful in some aspects, it seems almost every class addresses the importance of working in a team. You can tell someone how to be a good group member, but lecturing won't improve their emotional intelligence without action. Most of this action in business schools, at least currently, comes from group projects.

Using group projects to develop communication skills is a flawed system in some ways. As Rajiv Vaidyanathan, a professor of marketing and director of MBA programs at the University of Minnesota Duluth, said, "You can't throw group work at people and expect them to learn to work together" (personal communication, November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2016). It takes more than just putting them in the situation. While working with peers is an important part of learning more about a field of study, this doesn't always allow students to work with others from different backgrounds. "Group think" mentality often takes over. This is a problem because then students are not invested or giving feedback to their peers. Personally, I have been in many group projects where members do not work together to complete work. Rather, each does their work independently and combines it at the end with little to no feedback on the others' work. Some students do very little to nothing, and others end up doing most, if not all, of the project. This leads to resentment and issues within the team. Although this may teach students to work in difficult teams, this type of activity does not teach them to work in an effective manner as a team. Both students who over-compensate and those who ride on the success of others are really

cheated out of the group work experience. This is not to say we should completely get rid of group work all together, but poor group work environments can leave students with deficiencies in communication (which is a key factor in emotional intelligence and the only real emotional intelligence skill that is built upon through group work).

Businesses train employees as they come into their organization. Compared to soft skills, “the hard skills of IT training, maintenance training, technical training, and product training are straightforward” (Phillips 2015). Thus, employers tend to invest in hard skills because hard skills are readily seen in an employee’s direct performance. For example, if an employee cannot operate their software, their competence is clearly lacking. However, it can be harder to tell when an employee is not an effective personal communicator because the results are not as tangible. Because there is so much focus on hard skills, current soft-skills development is severely lacking in the work place.

Although soft-skills building seems like an abstract concept, some companies have recognized the value of increasing these skills; however, investing in soft-skills can also be very time consuming and expensive for companies, so often the training is not properly funded. In Phillips’ study, the authors studied over 5,000 companies and only 10% followed through enough to make a noticeable impact, and only 5% saw any effects on their return on investment (ROI). Phillips writes that “programs slated for ROI are expensive, strategic, [and] very important to the organization and executives” (Phillips 2015). This means that although an organization may know soft skills development are important, the cost can prevent proper training to take place and leave employees without proper training in handling others, maintaining their own emotions, and communicating with others. This leaves a deficiency for employees.

If students found another way to develop soft skills, not only would students benefit, but businesses would benefit as well. This other way of training could be in supplement to group project work to make the experience overall more enjoyable and meaningful to students. As mentioned earlier, a student must carry out action to learn skills, and what better way to carry out action than to act?

### **Acting Proven to Develop Soft Skills**

Theatre is an art where communication takes place in many different forms, from designing, to acting, to directing. As mentioned previously, we will focus on how acting builds soft skills. These soft skills will give actors an edge in the job market. Many studies have been conducted to better understand the effects of theatre training on communication. In Matthew Lerner's studies with children with autism, he found performance-based training in the form of theatre games helped the children come out of their shell and relate to one another. In his study comparing students who received the theatre training to a control group, the theatre students ranked more socially aware. Although this is a study focused on children with autism, his study shows some of the results of theatre-based training including increased social cue pick-up and understanding of others' emotions. (Hartigan 2012). This would make sense in thinking how acting works. Acting is not just about memorizing lines, it is about taking physical cues from other actors when something goes wrong and using creative problem solving to fix issues as they arise. Additionally, when working with another person, understanding their emotional state is important. If a person can take another's emotions into mind, it will be easier to understand their point of view. Other studies have been conducted on students without autism and results have been similar. Thalia Goldstein at Yale University conducted a study with elementary school students. She compared their empathy results to those of their peers and found that students who

participated in theatre had a higher emotional understanding of others (empathy). She was quoted to say, “Acting is thinking about character and motivation and why people do the things they do” (Hartigan 2012). Actors must analyze their character’s objectives and must understand why the character is doing something if they have any hope of communicating this to the audience. Not only that but actors must think about what other characters want from them to move the scene forward. This is what she accredited the increase of social awareness to. Drama therapists have been applauding the use of theatre as a social device for years, saying it improves empathy and understanding of human emotion and can even be used to battle mental struggles, although some question the means of their studies.

Some may ask if the soft skills developed in theatre transfer to the business world. In an exploratory study from the Southern African Business Review, the authors set out to answer that question. They worked with a CEO in a major business in the hospitality industry to create a series of theatre education courses for their middle managers. They hypothesized that the demands an actor faces, such as understanding their character’s needs and emotions, would help a manager identify both their own and others’ needs and emotions. These trainings focused on improvisation theatre and taking on others roles in roleplays. After the training sessions were completed, total EQ improved on average over eleven points. Not only that, but they also showed benefits to intrapersonal skills, stress management, adaptability, and general mood (Munro 2015). Although this is a smaller sample group, this study is opening the doors of bringing business and theatre together. All of these skills are important in a business communication setting. By improving skills with theatre prior to graduation, students would already have higher emotional intelligence and be ready for the workforce.



## **Practical Soft Skills from Theatre Productions**

In theatrical productions, every show has moving parts that a director has to coordinate. Directors must be clear and concise with their direction to pull the proper behaviors from their cast and crew. Managers in a work setting must be specific with their demands as well. Because most elements of a play do not come together until the last few weeks, it is so important for actors to communicate with the director their thoughts and respond to criticism. Successful actors are not afraid to ask for aid to understand, but they also know how to express and communicate their own ideas as well. Communication is key to theatre and helps actors the rest of their lives. Employers want people who understand, not only how to take and ask for direction, but how to give direction as well.

Aside from inside a theatre, there is another key way communication plays a role. Every production is a communication between the cast and the audience. Actors and directors know the importance of communication because for their craft to be appreciated, the audience has to understand their performance. Without this abstract greater idea of communication, the art form is meaningless. Anne Bogart, professor of theatre at Columbia University and head of the SITI Company in New York, went as far as to call this a “transaction” between the audience and actors (Cummings 2006). Although many don’t realize it, actors watch the body language of and feed off the audience’s energy. This transaction of energy is very important. Bogart goes on to say that the medium itself of live performance is a message due to the special communication (Cummings 2006). Actors must take on the thoughts and feelings of another person, which builds their empathy skills, and communicate those ideas effectively. The director must think of all elements and how said elements contribute to the overall message of the show while actors must work together to make the message come to life. This is similar to any work environment in that

their customers are their audience. Businesses must learn how to communicate with their clients and respond to what they want. Theatre students already have learned how to do this and know how to look at the big picture.

### **Business and Theatre in Harmony**

In perfect practice, the ideal situation would be to have students involved in business participate in a theatrical production process. However, some students are not interested in this much of a time commitment or have the skills necessary to have a successful learning experience. Another solution, the one this paper argues, would be to require students be enrolled in a theatre class focused on soft skills. With the current business requirements, there is no overlap in classes between theatre and business. If business students could take a specific theatre class specialized for soft skills development, they would be able to develop skills while obtaining their business degree. This theatre class would give them a different experience and put students outside their comfort zones. The projects are more based on the process of learning rather than just a final product and stress the importance of soft skills like communication, empathy, and understanding emotions. Some employees need more extensive soft skills training than others, and ideally companies could save money by hiring employees who have high self-efficacy with emotional intelligence through theatre.

Below are the two elements I would most recommend business schools include to develop soft skills. Each of these topics, while based in theatre, has specific types of soft skills they incorporate. Administrators should consider requiring a three-credit theatre course that would count toward their elective credits in their liberal arts portion of their degree. A three-credit course would allow ample time to delve into both elements presented.

### *Introduction to Acting*

It is not uncommon to have an introduction course when learning a new subject. The focus of Introduction to Acting is understanding objectives, emotions, and working with a partner or ensemble. These topics, as mentioned previously, build emotional intelligence and self-awareness. Currently, the University of Minnesota Duluth does offer an introduction to acting course which is open to all majors to fill the fine arts requirement. The class is structured to give students a taste of acting and introduce basic concepts. The students prepare two person scenes, participate in a variety of theatre exercises including telling a personal story, and prepare a final monologue to perform in front of the class. By asking students to work on creative projects with a partner, they are not able to do the work separately. Both people must be engaged and involved for it to work. They must work together, communicate their ideas, and communicate those ideas to the audience. Even solo projects, such as monologues, develop emotional intelligence by thinking of their character's feelings and how to communicate those to the audience with body language. At the end, the group could even put together small scenes or a performance to try to capture the experience of putting on a full production.

Travis Hagerman, a senior marketing student with an emphasis in sales, took this class during his freshman year at UMD. He never had attended an acting class or been involved in theatre before, but took the class wanting to get out of his comfort zone. During our interview, he could not say enough about the benefits he found taking the class from a business perspective. He found himself more comfortable in public speaking. He also said the class helped him manage his own emotions and how he displayed them. The class helped him think in new ways and develop his creativity. When asked about a specific example of how this theatre class helped him in his major, he used the example of sales roleplays to practice selling. In these roleplays

(which are a form of theatre itself), he found it helped him in adapting his social style for his buyer and take on a different persona to make the sale. He recommends business students take this class (personal communication, November 10<sup>th</sup>, 2016).

### *Improvisation*

Improvisational theatre is all about thinking quickly and creating theatre on the spot. Every day, unscripted person to person interactions require improvised conversations to address needs. Improv acting requires the actor to both let go of self-consciousness, but to pay attention to the situation and listen to their fellow actors. Other exercises in improv work on skills such as concentration, focus, creativity, and teamwork. By improving the skills that make for strong improvisation actors, we can make business students who can translate these skills to their work.

The director of the MBA program at UMD, Rajiv Vaidyanathan, mentioned earlier, began implementing a form of this theatre style for MBA students. He enlisted the expertise of Tom Isbell, a theatre professor at UMD, to create a one credit elective class focusing on improv theatre. Vaidynathan was first inspired to start this class from his personal experience in college in a theatre group. They were having a workshop in improvisation when the director gave him helpful advice. The point of improv acting was not to be funny, even if it was funny at times. The point is for both partners to listen to each other and figure out where they want to take the scene. This mentality of listening and understanding is valued in business as well. Isbell led many theatre exercises and team exercises over the 16 hours of class time to help them become more spontaneous and adaptive while using critical thinking skills to approach their new situations. Many of these graduate students were middle level managers who tended to be analytical thinkers. Isbell enjoyed getting to see these students use a different part of their brain to approach

these exercises. Below are three reflections from former students, provided by Vaidyanathan, to help see the impact the class had on them:

- “ I credit this class with bringing out more of my spontaneity and creativity, and this has spilled over into other areas of my life.”
- “I may have been skeptical that growth in creativity and spontaneity were possible at this point in my life. Class experiences suggest there are considerable untapped resources that remain to be explored for both myself, as well as others that work with me.”
- “I started the day thinking that I was there because I needed another one credit course and there were no other options other than the ‘Theater for Business’ course.... I became very positive and enthusiastic about the relevance of the skills needed to be successful in improvisational theater because the skills are the same ones that make any team successful. These [skills] include being a good listener, believing in one’s self, trusting other team members, having spontaneity, adapting... and dealing with fear and uncertainty.”

Many business students would be able to take these skills of creativity and innovation into the workforce, although from the outside it is easy to just see theatre as learning artistic skills. However, Naylor writes that skills are “repackaged to be used both inside and outside the arts sector” and are “increasingly highly sought after in the workforce” (2015). He supports this assertion by citing graduates from the Conservatorium in Sydney, Australia. Through surveys, he was able to see that many graduates had moved to other fields. He commented that, “Those graduates who choose or are forced to work outside the creative industries also carry these virtues in their professional roles” (Naylor 2015). A good employee will likely be promoted

during their time with a company. If an employee already had skills that we teach managers they would be ready for these upper-level positions.

### **Conclusion**

Theatre is a means to develop soft skills, particularly communication. Every job requires employees to be able to communicate face to face both effectively and efficiently. Currently, the education received on the job regarding soft skills is below par. By requiring students to study acting, students can improve their emotional intelligence and have the potential to become a more desirable employee. These students will be better equipped to understand their own emotional state and display of emotions as well as communicate with others and understand their emotions. Schools would be able to make their students more desirable by including forms of theatre in their curriculum because businesses hiring these students would be able to save money on soft skills training. Not only that, but these students would be more productive and competent members of their team.

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